

**THE TANTRIC RĀDHĀ:
SOME CONTROVERSIES ABOUT THE NATURE OF RĀDHĀ
IN BENGALI VAISHNAVISM AND THE RĀDHĀ TANTRA**

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There are many forms of Vaishnava understanding and practice in India, and many views of the role of Rādhā. For some writers she is the wife of Krishna, for others his favored beloved; for some she is a folk goddess, and for others the family deity of a ruling house or the erotic heroine of court poetry.¹ Her role is an important part of any understanding of Bengali Vaishnava belief and practice.

One controversial set of interpretations of Vaishnava thought in West Bengal is the approach often labelled "Sahajiyā." There is no one single Sahajiyā doctrine, sacred text, philosophy or ritual practice, but there are a set of beliefs and actions which have come to be linked into a conglomerate Sahajiyā perspective. While different Sahajiyā texts emphasize different beliefs and practices, we see certain themes that tend to recur. These include a theology which is either dualistic (Rādhā and Krishna are deities of equal and separate power, like Puruṣa and Prakṛti in Samkhya philosophy) or monotheistic (with Rādhā as the primary deity, and Krishna as her emanation, consort or devotee); a practice which involves sexual *sādhana* or ritual action (often with Rādhā and Krishna as a sort of Kundalini and Śiva equivalent); and texts which speak of the physical body as a microcosm of the universe, a place in which meditation may guide the soul to inner paradises and worlds.

Different writers focus upon different aspects of the Sahajiyā approaches. Among Western writers, Edward Dimock has emphasized the romantic

and idealistic aspects shown in Sahajiyā poetry²; Glen Hayes the subtle body and its physiology as shown in Sahajiyā ritual texts³; and Hugh Urban the economic aspects of institutionalized Sahajiyā groups⁴. In West Bengal, the venerable *Obscure Religious Cults* by Shashibhusan Dasgupta finds the basis of Sahajiyā thought in earlier Bengali tantric Buddhism.⁵

Sahajiyā is a controversial system because mainstream Gauḍiya or Bengali Vaishnavism is monotheistic, with Krishna as the single deity from which the universe emanates; it does not accept sexual ritual as a legitimate practice for Vaishnava devotees; and it emphasizes Vṛndāvana as a transcendent paradise in which all devotees recognize their true and ultimate nature as servants of Krishna, rather than an immanent set of worlds where Sahajiyā yogis may choose both their identities and their forms of pleasure.

On the topic of Rādhā, the Gauḍiya position is quite clear. Rādhā is the eternal consort and greatest beloved of Krishna, the highest god. Rādhārāṇī is the queen of beauty and goddess of Vṛndāvana; eternally perfect, she represents the highest form of love. Theologically, the play (*līlā*) of Rādhā and Krishna reflects the overflowing joy of the divine. Rādhā is Krishna's power of bliss, his *hlādinī-śakti*, in its fullest form as *purna-śakti*. By means of *hlādinī-śakti*, Krishna is bliss itself, becomes blissful, and causes bliss in the devotee. This is the most powerful *śakti*, which incorporates both the energy of existence (*saindhini śakti*) and the knowledge or consciousness of existence (*sahvit śakti*) within it.⁶ The gopīs are Rādhā's emanations (*kāya vyūha*), who are manifest to help in the Vraja-*līlā* of Rādhā and Krishna. One of the most important gopīs is Candrāvalī, but Rādhā is always superior to her and is the main focus of Krishna's love. Rādhā and Krishna are both different and non-different, like flame and fire. However, together they form a whole, and Krishna without Rādhā is imperfect (*apurṇa*).⁷

Rādhā expresses the highest emotional state, *mahābhāva*, a state of intense love which fascinates even Krishna. It is a love which is ecstatic and always new, a melting of the heart which leads to divine madness, with the heart as a sea of powerful emotion. Rādhā's style of love is *mādhurya*, intense devotion and passionate love, and it is sweet because it is forbidden (*parakiyā*), at least in the manifest world. The manifestation in human form allows the divine couple more focus on this sweetness, and less on divine grandeur (*aīsvarya*).

Rādhā is especially important in the Gauḍiya school because of her joint incarnation with Krishna in the body of Caitanya Mahāprabhu. In

this tradition, it is believed that Krishna wished to experience the sweetness of Rādhā's love, so he assumed her feelings as well as her beauty in the human form of Caitanya. Caitanya's Rādhā-*bhāvā*, his identification with Rādhā and mad love for Krishna, is seen in many texts, and perhaps first described by Rāmānanda Rāy in the *Caitanya caritāmṛta*.

In the Sahajiyā tradition, Rādhā is often interpreted as more of a principle than a goddess. The name "Sahajiyā" is said by Das Gupta to come from the tantric Buddhist term *sahaja*, the ultimate state of bliss which is beyond duality, and associated with *samarasa*, the sameness or oneness of emotion, "the realisation of one truth as the flow of a unique emotion of all-pervading bliss."⁸ Ultimate truth is found through inborn and natural tendencies; as it is often phrased, "truth dwells within the body." Among Vaishnava Sahajiyās, we see an emphasis on the central role of woman, and on practices of sexual yoga which generate the *sahaja* state of bliss. It idealizes forbidden love, which is always exciting, as superior to dharmic married love, which becomes repetitive and obligatory. There are many Sahajiyā groups: Kartā-bhājās, Śākhi-bhāvakas, Kiśori-bhajanās, Sāhebdhanis, Darvesis, Spastādāyakas, even Vaishnava Bāuls. Each has its own unique set of values and theology, though they share the notion that all women are in some sense Rādhā and all men in some sense Krishna. When this inner identity is realized, the human relationship of love on earth becomes the reflection of divine play in Vṛndāvana, and the human sexual embrace incorporates the cosmic one.

One text along these lines which gives some unusual interpretations of the role of Rādhā is the *Rādhā Tantra* (a text of unknown authorship). Its time of origin is debated, but it is relatively late. In its introduction, the editor states that it was edited at Vaishnava request, and that it could benefit both Śāktas and Vaishnavas, especially Vaishnavas performing *sādhana*.⁹ However, this claim is a questionable one.

The Vaishnavism in the *Rādhā Tantra* is not mainstream Vaishnavism. While it includes some Sahajiyā elements, it does not focus upon Rādhā and Krishna as the most important of deities. The *Rādhā Tantra* appears to be a text of the Śākta *kulācāra* tradition, which calls itself Vaishnava as a way of gaining a wider audience. The only way that this text could conceivably be understood as Vaishnava is by identifying it as some original form of Sahajiyā Vaishnavism: In it, Rādhā and Krishna are understood as emanations of the *mahāvidyā* goddess Tripurāsundarī and the god Vishnu, who are themselves aspects of Devī and Maheśvara. Rādhā and Krishna are

human. Vishnu/Vasudeva is a god in search of spiritual knowledge and power (*siddhi*), which he eventually gains by performing *kulācāra sādhana* with his female consort. Also, according to this tantra, Rādhā is not Krishna's bliss, his *hlādinī śakti*, but rather his *sādhana śakti*, his ritual partner, who helps him in his search for knowledge and power.

The story in the text is largely narrated by Śiva to Girijā, daughter of the Himalayas, and as such is *āgama tantra*. However, one of its major characters is Vishnu/Vasudeva, and the text usually calls itself "The Rādhātantra of Vasudeva." Śiva extolls its virtues:

As the *Kālitantra* and the *Tolantantra* are most pure and stainless, and full of true hidden teachings, so is Vāsudeva's secret *Rādhātantra*, to which you should listen. It is full of power (*śakti*), able to bestow the goals of life and omniscience (*brahmajñāna*), and it blesses all people. (I.3)

Towards the beginning of the text (I.8), Śiva tells Mahāviṣṇu Vāsudeva to worship Tripurāsundari in order to gain *mukti* and *siddhi*, which he would be unable to attain without the worship of the ten *mahāvidyā* goddesses.¹⁰ Clearly, Vishnu as described here is not the great god of the Vaishnavas—Vishnu is a practitioner of various forms of *sādhana*, and he seeks powers (*siddhis*) through his practice. He performed austerities at Kāśī and other places, for Kāśī was a powerful place and the embodiment of the *yoni*, the symbol of the goddess (*yoni svarūpini*). He worked quite hard on his austerities:

Vāsudeva buried his head in the earth, and stood on his head. After that, he worshipped Parameśvari, Bhavāni, and Tripurāsundari. But though he performed difficult practices, he did not attain his goal. O Parameśānil! Powerful Vishnu was doing strong ascetic practice (*sādhana*), and he shone like the light of a thousand suns. (I.17)

However, he did eventually attain the vision of the goddess Mahāmāyā Tripurāsundari, who advised him to practice sexual yoga:

After performing long and difficult austerities, Vāsudeva was unable to gain perfection (*siddhi*). Then Mahāmāyā appeared. Mahāmāyā Tripurāsundari appeared to Vāsudeva. She bathed him with nectar and revived him, and looked compassionately at him and said,

"O dear boy (lit. calf)! Why do you perform such difficult *tapasyā*? Arise quickly and tell me what you desire from me."

Having heard Tripurāsundari's words (which were like) a rain of nectar, Vāsudeva was very happy, and he fell at Tripurāsundari's feet.

Vāsudeva praised her...

Tripurāsundari was very pleased with Vāsudeva's praises, and said, "O mighty Vāsudeval! Listen to what I say. It is useless to keep performing these austerities without *kulācāra* (practice). You will not gain *mantra siddhi*. How can you have *siddhi* without *śakti*?"

"Look, you should realize that Lakṣmi¹¹ is a part (*amsa*) of me. Why do you forsake her, and do this useless *tapasyā* (alone)? Without *śakti* yoga, *pūjā*, *japa*, *tapasyā*, and other practices will all be useless."

"O practitioner (*tapodhan*)! I will give you some advice. Do yoga carefully with your consort (*śakti*); if you do not, you will never gain the perfection that you seek." (I.18-24)

The goddess gives Vishnu/Vāsudeva advice on how to attain *siddhi*. She suggests practice of chanting the name of Hari, and tells him its hidden interpretation:

O Vāsudeva, what I am telling you is very secret, so listen carefully. You should chant *harinām* publicly, in the community or in any other place, but the true nature of this *harinām* (*harināmātmikā*), which is (worship of the) *mahāvidyās*, is secret, and you should never disclose it to anyone. (II.3)

She also states that *harinām* is necessary for initiation by the *kulaguru* (I.49), and that through it all castes may be initiated into worship of the *mahāvidyā* goddesses. The mantra gives salvation (if it is directed towards Tripurāsundari and chanted in the *gāyatri* meter) because it represents the union of Śiva and the goddess.¹²

Vāsudeva is told of Rādhā, who will appear in Vṛndāvana to be his ritual partner. Rādhā will become incarnate in order to help Vāsudeva in his spiritual practice, when he will be incarnate in the form of Krishna:

(The goddess) said to Vāsudeva, "Do not be afraid. You should go to Mathurā, and then you will gain *vidya siddhi* (perfect knowledge, in this case of the yogic powers).

"O Vāsudeva! Go quickly to Mathurā, and have sex (*sāngam*) there with Padminī. Padminī is a part of me (*amśabhūtā*) and will appear in Vṛndāvana in the form of Rādhā. The other manifestations (*mātrikās*) will follow."

Vāsudeva said, "O Mahāmāyā, you can bestow the four goals of life. Without you, perfect wisdom would not be possible.

"O beautiful one! Show me Padminī quickly, so that I may have strong faith (in you)." Padminī listened to Vāsudeva's words, and immediately she became visible before him.

Padminī appeared, looking like a red lightning-bolt, with a graceful form and a beautiful scent of lotuses. She was enchanting to all. With her companions (*sakhīs*), she was the essence of joyful play (*bihārīkāriṇī*).

She lived eternally in the midst of a thousand-petalled lotus, and she was surrounded by her companions. They chanted mantras (*paramāṅkṣara*) to the Supreme One (*paramātmā*). (VI.1-8)

The goddess kept her word, and her emanation became incarnate during the full moon fortnight in the month of Caitra. She appeared in the form of a shining egg in a garden of lotuses. Brikabhānu had been worshipping Mahākālī along the river bank, and the goddess appeared to him. When she asked what boon he would like, he asked for a daughter who was just like the goddess. She gave him the egg from which Rādhā emerged.

In the month of Caitra (at an auspicious time)...there were many lotuses in the waves of the Kālīndī. On one of these lotuses, an illusory egg (*māyā dimba*) appeared.

Golden Padminī appeared enclosed within the egg. This egg was full of *māyā*, and its radiance was as bright as millions of moons.

At an auspicious moment, exactly at midnight, (the light of) Padminī emerged from the egg. It was like an asparagus flower (*śatmūli kusum*), and lit up the garden of lotuses like a beautiful rising sun.

Great-souled Brikabhānu was sitting on the banks of the Yamunā, and he had been worshiping the *mahāvidyā* goddess Mahākālī for a long time. Then the goddess Mahāmāyā Kātyāyanī appeared to him.

Kātyāyanī said, "O mighty one. Your spiritual practice has been successful, now ask for what you desire."

Brikabhānu said, "O Mahādevi! I have performed this practice in hope of your grace. O Mahāmāyā! I ask for your favor (*prasād*).

"With your grace, nothing is impossible. I ask you to give me a little daughter, who looks just like you (*sadriśrūpā*)."

"O Brikabhānu! Because of your devotion, I will give great happiness to you and your wife. These are my words: you will give something beautiful to your wife."

The goddess Mahāmāyā (had taken on the form of) the goddess Kātyāyanī for Brikabhānu, and she gave him a most beautiful little egg.

Mahātmā Brikabhānu immediately returned home to his wife, who was large-hipped and enchanted the world. His wife shone like an island of treasures, and was seated on a golden couch.

Brikabhānu put the beautiful egg into her hand. Brikabhānu's wife looked at the egg with astonishment, and began to watch it. It was fragrant, full of light and power, and it spontaneously broke into two parts.

From within this egg, they saw a girl emerge in the form of Padminī, (a girl who) was the enchanter of Krishna's heart. Her appearance was like red lightning, and very auspicious. On seeing the girl, Brikabhānu's wife was astonished.

His wife said, "O Mother! You must conceal this supernatural (Padminī) form!" As soon as the girl had hidden the Padminī-form, she immediately took on the form of an ordinary human being.

Then the girl said, "O dear mother! Give me milk to drink. Quickly give me your breast, and then I will (really) become your daughter."

Hearing the girl's words, (Brikabhānu's wife) gave her the breast to drink from (and she became a real daughter).

Then Brikabhānu named his (new) daughter. He named her Rādhikā, this girl who was bright like lightning, and later she became famous.

Mahādevī said, "This girl at Brikabhānu's house grew older day by day. Then in the month of Bhādra, Krishna was born." (VII.4-6,9-12,14-21,23-26).

The theology of the *Rādhā Tantra* is complex. Rādhā is both a Vaishnava and Śākta goddess, an emanation of the *mahāvidyā* goddess Tripurāsundarī (who is also identified with Mahāmāyā and Jagaddhātri). Padminī is called the *dūti* of Tripurāsundarī, a term which literally means agent or messenger. However, in this text Padminī is more than a messenger, she is a most important part (*paramkalā*) of Tripurāsundarī. Thus, I use the term "emanation" for her. Padminī's human manifestation or incarnation is Rādhā (similarly, Krishna is the human form of Vāsudeva). Rādhā is thus the divine Padminī, the human Rādhā, and also the human Candrāvalī. These incarnational forms were voluntary on her part:

Mahādevī said, "This Rādhā, she is Vishnu's beloved Padminī, Tripurādevī, Mahāmāyā, Jagaddhātri and Parameśvarī.

"Padminī who smells of lotuses is the emanation (*dūti*) of Tripurādevī, to whom Vāsudeva is extremely devoted.

"Brikabhānu is a great souled-one, and that Padminī who loves Krishna has by her own consent become his daughter."

When Rādhā's time of nursing (from her mother's breast) was over, she left. She took shelter in the cluster of lotuses in the middle of Jamunā's waters (in the form of Padminī).

She entered a deserted area, and did *mantra* and *japa* to Mahākālī. (But) another Padmā (Candrāvalī) stayed at Brikabhānu's house.¹³

Thus we have one Rādhikā with three forms: Rādhā as the shining Padminī, Rādhā as Krishna's beloved, and (Rādhā) in the form of Padminī Candrāvalī. She was as full of light as the moon and sun, so that one could barely see her. (IX.1-5,7)

The human Candrāvalī is an aspect of Rādhā, and she is also called the chief companion (*sakhī*) of Rādhā, who helps Krishna to achieve *siddhī*

(XVII.8) The text describes Vṛndāvana as a sacred site, an eight-cornered *yogapīṭha*, in which Rādhā's companions each have a place. Candrāvalī sits in a corner of the Vṛndāvana *yogapīṭha*, which is twenty-four miles wide, surrounded by flowering trees. It is full of light and has a jeweled throne. It is full of power and *rasa*, with thousands of gopīs whose bodies glisten like pure gold. It is the perfect place for spiritual practice, for it is in the form of the eternal *yoni* (*nitya yoni rūpā*), and it is sanctified by a hair of Sati hidden below the ground. (XIII.17)¹⁴

The *Rādhā Tantra* periodically takes time to describe the nature of Rādhā and Krishna. The influence of Sankhya philosophy, in which the universe is a manifestation of the relationship between Puruṣa and Prakṛti, is strong:

Prakṛti Devī pervades the universe, and is present throughout the universe in female and male form.

Prakṛti Devī is seen in both female and male form. Beyond the three *guṇas*, Mahāvishnu Vāsudeva is (really) Parmeśvara (Śiva).

You see this form of Vāsudeva only because of *vidya siddhi*; otherwise he is without form. (XVIII.3-5)

Both Rādhā and Krishna are manifestations of other deities:

This Rādhikā that you see is Tripurā's emanation Padminī; and her companions are Tripurādevī's eight *nāyikās*.

Mahāvishnu Vāsudeva received the goddess Tripurā's grace, and performed various practices (*sādhanas*) taking on various bodies.

Vāsudeva took on the form (*mūrti*) of Krishna, and worshipped Mahāvidyā Mahākālī (while) together with (his consort) Padminī/Rādhā.

In this way, Hari took shelter in Vṛndavana, and Vāsudeva incarnated himself in the form of Krishna. (XVIII.6-9)

In this text, Krishna/Vāsudeva is a seeker, a practitioner of *kulācāra tantra*, a form of practice which frequently violates dharma and involves sexual ritual with a consort (*śakti*). This is a different understanding of *śakti* than the orthodox Vaishnava interpretation, in which *śaktis* are emanations of Krish-

na. Here, the *śakti* is Rādhikā, who teaches Krishna about worship of the goddess Kāli:

Tripurā's emanation Padminī, in the form of Rādhikā, performed very rare and secret *kulācāra* practices every day.

These (techniques of) *kulācāra sādhanas* are concealed in the tantras. Padminī practiced all of them.

Lotus-garlanded Padminī had abandoned her own form, and taken on the form of Rādhā.

Most wonderful Padminī took on the form of Rādhā *śakti*, (the form which) enchants Krishna, and began performing *kulācāra sādhana* freely in the beginning of the autumn.

Krishna performed *kulācāra sādhana*, and he had inwardly perceived many things. Lotus-eyed Krishna performed *kulācāra sādhana* with much sensuality (*kāma*), according to the tantras.¹⁵

He had performed *pūjā* to the eight *nayikas* at the wonderful eight-cornered *pīṭha* (of Vṛndāvana), and he worshipped Kālikā in that *pūjā*.

Krishna went to the seven *pīṭhas* (with Rādhā), and placing her at his left side, performed *japa* seven hundred thousand times, and gained *siddhi*.

Then Krishna worshipped Padminī/Rādhā's body, facing towards Kāmākhyā.¹⁶ He performed *vyāpaka nyāsa* (the far-reaching mudra) and worshipped the goddess of the *pīṭha*.

He worshipped his *iṣṭadevi* Mahākāli according to the various forms of *kulācāra sādhana* described in the tantras, with ritual offerings such as fragrant flowers and incense.

Krishna worshipped Mahādevi on (or in) Padminī/Rādhā's body, according to the ritual, and chanted mantras one hundred thousand times. After this he went to Kāmarūpa.

Kāmarūpa is a Śākta ritual site (*yonipitha*), and Krishna worshipped his own *iṣṭadevi* (Kāli) there, and chanted mantras one hundred thousand times. He became lost in meditation. (XXI.19-30).

Krishna eventually gained the vision of the goddess Kāli, who asked him for his greatest wish. He asked only for her presence, saying that since she had appeared, nothing in the universe would be impossible for him. She gave him the gift of fame in the Kali-yuga, saying that people would come to worship him during that time (XXI.44-47). Thus, according to this text, Krishna's popularity in recent centuries has been due to the grace of the goddess Kāli.

The goddess is also the originator of several Vaishnava mantras. For instance, she visits Rādhā, and addresses her as Krishna's ritual partner (*śakti*) and as a practitioner herself (*sādhikā*). She gives Rādhā the mantra "Om Krishna Rādhe Govinda Om," the nine-syllabled mantra, and tells her that practicing it is important. However, she described the mantra as entirely worldly (*prakṛtimāyā*). (XX.2-5) Thus, the mantra's importance is emphasized, but its meaning is changed.

Krishna is a dedicated practitioner, and his enthusiasm for *sādhana* is impressive:

World-enchanting Krishna rode on a boat on the Yamunā River, and practiced various forms of *kulācāra sādhana* (on it).

Lotus-eyed Krishna performed various sorts of *kulācāra sādhana* on public roads, in the midst of crowds, in forests, and in the midst of crowded streets with chariots (passing) and elephants and pedestrians (or foot-soldiers) walking along them. (XXIII.2-3)

Padminī/Rādhā gives Krishna various types of instruction, notably in sexual yoga:

"O Krishna! I am Tripurā's emanation Padminī, her highest aspect (*paramā-kalā*), and I am a virgin (*akṣat yoni*).

Krishna, do not ejaculate within me."¹⁷ Krishna listened to her words and said, "O beautiful one, I am your servant, and have taken shelter with you." (or, "I will do as you say").

Padminī/Rādhā heard Krishna's words, and on the full moon of the month of Kartik, she came to the banks of the Yamunā dressed and jewelled for their meeting.

She sat at Krishna's left side. Rādhā was a teacher (*pandit*) of love, and

Krishna was as skillful at love as Kāma. Together, they were beautiful, like lightning on a mountain peak.

At this time, during the night, they worshipped Mahākāli in various ways. They used incense, flowers, etc. Krishna was fortunate, and he did *pūjā* to Rādhā's *yonideśa*.

At midnight, Krishna and Rādhā together performed *kulācāra sādhana*, and they only stopped at dawn.

Padminī/Rādhā bowed mentally to Mahākāli. After meditation, she returned to her own place (as a part of the goddess Tripurāsundari).

At this time, Mahāmāyā Kālī appeared to Krishna. Kālikā said, "O Krishna, you have practiced carefully, and Rādhā too has gained Tripurā's blessings by her worship.

"O Krishna, you have gained *kundu siddhi*, *yoni siddhi*, and *swayambhu siddhi*, as well as other *siddhis*.

"O Krishna, whatever else you desire may be gained through the other gopis." After saying this, she disappeared. (XXVIII.14-27).

Krishna continued to worship Mahākāli, and did spiritual practice with the gopis. He eventually married the eight companions of Rādhā, and the sixteen thousand other gopis; so that he had 16,008 wives. He returned to Mathurā, killed Karṇa and other demons, became king, and performed his worship of Mahākāli in a temple of gems. However, by this point Rādhā's role had ended.

The *Rādhā Tantra* embodies a peculiar version of Krishna/Vāsudeva's adventures: his seeking of *siddhi*, his birth as the human Krishna, his games and practices with Rādhā. It includes a variety of Vaishnava *litās*, such as Krishna's flirting with the gopis, playing in the water, and the problems of getting the milk to market. It is Vaishnava imagery with a Śākta twist, and its style is much more purānic than tantric. It is the purānas that tend to deal with incarnational adventures; tantras tend to be handbooks of instruction, giving details of mantra, *mudra*, *nyāsa*, ritual (*kriyā*) and visualization. The *Rādhā Tantra* avoids such details. When Krishna is doing *sādhana*, few details are given: he is said to be "following the rules as found in the tantras." The goal of the sexual yoga in this text is not control of the mind

and passions, as we might see in the tantras, but rather *siddhi* and *bhakti*, especially devotion to the goddess. However, the fact that it emphasizes sexual yoga at all shows that some tantric elements are present.

The *Rādhā Tantra* fits more closely into the purānic tradition. We first see Rādhā named in the purānas of the thirteenth century: the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, the *Padma Purāṇa*, the *Nāradiya* and *Brahmānda Purāṇas*.¹⁸ She is a Hindu great goddess in many of these, who creates the universe and saves her devotees. As Brown describes her in the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, her origin was a half of a primordial deity. Her perspiration created the cosmic waters, and she gave birth to a golden egg, from which emerged the universe.¹⁹ She had the roles of heavenly queen and mediator of Krishna's grace and compassion, and she was linked with ideas like *prakṛti*, *māyā*, and *śakti* taken from Hindu goddesses like Devī and Durgā. However, she was not ontologically superior to Krishna, and would eventually return to be a part of him. In her higher aspect she is mother goddess of the world, in her lower aspect she is Krishna's consort.

In other purānas she has similar status. In the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa*, her greatness is described in several verses, and she is to be visualized as sitting on a golden throne within the *manḍala* of the gopis, in the form of a beautiful twelve-year-old girl.²⁰ According to this *Purāṇa*, Rādhā is an incarnation of Śiva, who is the highest god. Śiva wished to be born in female form, and convinced Parvati to be born in male form, as Śiva's husband. Thus they became incarnate as Rādhā and Krishna. Rādhā and the gopis were all aspects or emanations of Śiva, and Rādhā became the main consort of Krishna/Parvati.²¹ Her worship can give salvation, and the person who performs it properly goes to Goloka. In the *Padma Purāṇa*, she is Krishna's *hlādī śakti*, and the most ideal form of the feminine. The text says that, though Krishna calls, it is better to serve Rādhā, and to give her greater devotion.²²

In one way, the *Rādhā Tantra* is an attempted synthesis of Vaishnava and Śākta ideas, focusing upon their shared interest in *sādhana*. However, in another way it is a text in disguise: a Śākta philosophy disguised as Vaishnava philosophy, a purāṇa disguised as a tantra. It shows the phenomenon of "devotee rustling," in which one god or tradition attempts to convert the devotees of another god or tradition by saying that their god is a servant, manifestation, or disguised form of a different and superior god. Why serve an emanation when one can serve a higher deity? It is a subtle form of proselytizing, which does not involve the confrontation historically seen when

sages and pandits would debate theology. From this perspective, the text shows an indirect attempt to convert devotees from Vaishnavism to Śaktism. In either case, we see the figure of Rādhā in some of her many roles: Gauḍīya Vaishnava, Sahajiyā Vaishnava, Śaiva, and Śākta.

Gauḍīya Rādhā	Tantric Rādhā
Divine expansion of Krishna	Human expansion of goddess
<i>Hlādinī śakti</i>	<i>Sādhana śakti</i>
Incarnate to share <i>līlā</i>	Incarnate to give <i>siddhi</i>
Relationship with Krishna to express joy	Relationship with Krishna to teach meditation

Endnotes

1. See Sumanta Banerjee, *Appropriation of a Folk-Heroine: Radha in Medieval Bengali Vaishnavite Culture* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1993) for a discussion of these roles. He derives her origin from Abhira folklore, as a submissive low-caste milkmaid, appropriated by the upper castes to be the model for proper lower caste behavior. Banerjee claims that her role changes from a lover of Krishna to a servant of Krishna, as the image of the ideal Vaishnava devotee becomes more servile and less spontaneous over time.

2. Edward C. Dimock, Jr. *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaiṣṇava-sahajiyā Cult of Bengal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989/1966).

3. Glen Hayes, "Shapes for the Soul: A Study of Body Symbolism in the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā Tradition of Medieval Bengal" (PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1985).

4. Hugh Urban, *The Economics of Ecstasy: Secrecy and Symbolic Power in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

5. Shashibhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1976).

6. De, Sushil Kumar, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961), p. 280.

7. According to the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta*, 13.29: "When Krishna is with Rādhā, He attracts the universe; alone He may still attract the universe, but is Himself attracted

by Cupid." Cited in A. K. Majumdar, *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Studies* (Calcutta: Jijnasa, 1978), p. 55-56.

8. Shashibhusan Das Gupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1976), p. 31.

9. This edition of the *Rādhā Tantra* includes a Sanskrit text and commentary, and a Bengali translation. It is a second edition, published by Hiran Kumar Mukhopadhyaya, son of Yogacarya Svagīya Kamikṣya Nath Mukhopadhyaya, who edited and compiled the first edition. All quotes from the texts are from *Rādhā Tantra*, edited and compiled by Yogacarya Svagīya Kamikṣya Nath Mukhopadhyaya (Calcutta: Hiran Kumar Mukhopadhyaya/ Sanskrit Pustak Bhāndar), 1341 BS/1934 (first edition 1291 BS/1884), cited by chapter and verse. In order to limit the length of the quotes, I am omitting the various salutations (O Sundari, O Parameśāni, etc) which run through the text.

10. The *mahāvidyās* or great wisdom goddesses are ten forms of the Devī, mythologically originating from the time of Dakṣa's sacrifice and Sati's decision to attend the sacrifice against Śiva's wishes. The most prominent of the goddesses are Kālī, Tārā and Tripurāsundarī.

11. Here Lakṣmī is used in the sense of a female consort, rather than as the specific goddess Lakṣmī.

12. The tantra gives an alternative etymology for the mantra. It states that H represents Śiva, R represents Tripurādevī, and E is the *yonipīṭha*; or that H is the formless god, R is the god with form, and united they form the image of the deity (in this case, that deity is Tripurāsundarī). (I.39)

13. The Bengali text merely says, "another Padma," while the Sanskrit text says "Candrāvalī."

14. The presence of a hair of Sati makes Vṛndāvana a *śāktapīṭha*, an area sacred to Śāktas.

15. Strictly speaking, he should be inwardly detached during spiritual practice, rather than full of *kāma*, according to most tantras.

16. Kāmākhyā, or Kāmarūpa, has traditionally been a major center of goddess worship in India. It is located in Assam.

17. This may imply that she can remain a virgin as long as she does not become pregnant; this claim is not unknown to young women in the West. However, it is also a part of tantric ritual, especially in tantric Buddhism: the outflow of *bodhicitta* during ritual sex is forbidden.

18. C. Mackenzie Brown, "The Theology of Rādhā in the Purāṇas," in John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff, eds, *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 61.

19. Ibid, p. 57. Note the reversal in the *Rādhā Tantra*, in which she herself was

born from a golden egg.

20. Asoke Kumar Majumdar, "A Note on the Development of (the) Rādhā Cult," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 36 (1955), p. 244.

21. Ibid, p. 245.

22. Ibid, p. 246.

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